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ABSTRACT

There is a place in every classroom for individualized reading. A common-content-based approach can be employed at any grade level, provided appropriate modifications are made. The initial step is to tell the students that soon they will be choosing their own books to read. After that they are asked to try to think of the types of things about which they might read that might be found in one form or another in everyone's reading material, even though they might all be reading different things. With not much prompting, most classes can usually identify a list of characteristics common to people, such as love, wisdom, understanding, patience, and hatred. After discussing the terms and possibly constructing operational definitions for them, the children are asked to begin reading materials of their choice and to record as accurately as possible the page that contains an example of the characteristics listed. After the termination of the reading sessions, the teacher should present each pupil with a tally sheet containing a list of the human characteristics that were considered. (WR)

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UTILIZING COMMON CONTENT TO PROVIDE FOR GROUP EXPERIENCES STEMMING FROM INDIVIDUALIZED READING

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Some of the occurrences that reflect man's foolishness the most are the binary choices that he frequently forces himself to make. Although he knows better, he often reacts to decision making as though he has only two choices regarding a matter -- choices that usually are antipodal in nature. That which involves the best from each of the choices that he has identified is often neglected. A good example of such irrationality regards individualized reading. Too many reading teachers feel that they have but two modes of instruction to employ: the basal reader or the individualized approach.

Individualized reading, an instructional technique popularized during the 1960's by Jeannette Veatch and others, once was accepted, at least for a short time, by some reading teachers, as a panacea for the problems of coping with individual differences in the classroom. Before long, individualized reading became to some, it seems, a carefully defined method of teaching that one either knew or did not know how to use, and fortunately, or unfortunately -- depending on one's school of thought -- nobody knew quite where to learn completely about it. Like some other concepts in education it <u>was</u> but it <u>was not</u>. Even persons who were the most fervent advocates of the movement seemed never quite sure of whether they were employing the methods soundly, for in spite of the books and the articles that they had read,

despite their attendance in workshops and seminars regarding the matter, many of the proponents of the system felt insecure, especially when they found that there was no authority, human or bibliographical, whose words could be applied without more than moderate modification to all classrooms. It was about then, that the concept of individualized reading transmogrified to the stage reached by so many controversial, yet vital issues, the stage at which the entanglement of both its theoretically accurate and its unsound characteristics was reduced to a few over-simplified and inaccurate statements. Hence, when many of the more "daring" educators suggested using individualized reading, their colleagues would often state or imply that their choice was an imprudent one, because with individualized reading, skill development was always sacrificed. Consequently, the whole matter was often dropped, and another group of children missed the joy of being permitted, even occasionally, to read something in reading class that was not currently being read there by anyone else.

The purpose of this paper is to try to convince the reader that there is a place in every classroom for individualized reading, at least for the type of individualized reading described in the paragraphs that follow. The remaining portion of this work describes a method of reading instruction that is humane and seemingly necessary, one that surely must belong

in the "bag of tricks" possessed by every good teacher of reading. The method, a common-content-based approach, can be employed at any grade level, providing that appropriate modifications are made for each. Experience has shown that all that is needed to make the system work is an abundant supply of reading materials -- initially at least ten pieces for each child -- a reasonable demand, and an imaginative teacher. Furthermore, the system can be used effectively for long periods of time, short periods of time, or for any length of period in between, providing that the teacher conducts the sessions with prudence. Utilizing the method, the perceptive teacher soon realizes that pupils themselves usually indicate quite strongly when it is time for some other activity to begin.

When choosing reading materials for the common-content-based program, it is important to remember that each child should have available an ample supply of appropriate materials to read. To be appropriate, that which is chosen for a child, or by a child -- for he should be given the opportunity to bring in his own -- should correspond to his current interests, should honor his independent reading level, and should not be stigmatizing because of obvious, inappropriate levels of sophistication. Once an abundance of appropriate reading material is identified for each child, a demand must be made:

during class time, any child may do anything, providing that what he does does not interfere with the reading of others. Experience again has shown that although some pupils initially are daydreamers or sleepers, once those children realize that there are materials appropriate for them, they usually involve themselves in more desirable activities.

But the reading of books of the pupil's choice is not the initial step in the program of common content-based individualized reading, for the first step is to tell the children that soon that is what they will be doing. After that they are asked to try to think of the types of things about which they might read that might be found in one form or another in everyone's reading material, even though they might all be reading different things. With not much prompting, most classes can usually identify a list of characteristics common to people, most of which are often thought of as being the abstract nouns; for example, love, wisdom, understanding, patience, and hatred. After listing a group of ten to twenty such words (sometimes less than ten if the composition of the group seems to demand a lower number), each of the terms should be incorporated into one or more of a variety of language arts activities. The purpose of those experiences is to convince the pupil that condition$_1$ is never exactly equal to condition$_2$; that is, love, hatred, or any of the

human characteristics, can be seen in many different forms in a variety of situations. Realizing that is often a most significant lesson for many children, for even disproportionate numbers of adults, it seems, are not always cognizant of such facts.

After discussing the terms as stated and possibly after constructing some operational definitions for the words, the children are asked to begin reading materials of their choice and to record as briefly as possible the page that contains an example of any of the abstract characteristics listed. To make their record keeping easier, the children can be encouraged to maintain a "love" page, a "wisdom" page, an "understanding" page, and so on. The reading, then, and the recording can be continued until the class indicates by its behavior that it is time for a different activity.

The length of a typical common-content-based individualized reading term depends on a number of variables: the age group involved, the mental and experiential composition of the group, and the characteristics of the teacher, to name just a few. Experiences with the technique have indicated success, however, with a minimum of six hours of reading to a maximum of over twenty-five, depending on the variables to which referral has been made. The experienced teacher, it seems, can sense the need for a change in activities before

uncomfortable conditions for the class develop. Surprising to some teachers who have employed the technique is the lengthy time period during which most youngsters will read once they have been matched with reading materials that are appropriate for them.

After the termination of the reading sessions, the teacher should present each pupil with a tally sheet containing a list of the human characteristics that were considered. Although it is dangerous for the non-psychologist to psychologize, the characteristics observed and those not observed by any particular child are often revealing of his general personality. Some children, for example, seem to see nothing in their reading except the positive; such as beauty, love, and understanding, while others see nothing but the negative.

Once the tallies are made a broad range of instructional activities that can serve to draw the pupils into a variety of common experiences can be utilized. Advanced students, for example, might be presented with a writing assignment based upon the techniques of characterization of Theophrastus, the ancient Greek. Looking at "The Coward" that he wrote, for instance, the pupil can write a paper dealing with the trait of which he found the most examples as he was reading, resulting in a character sketch of "The Hero," "The Patriot," "The Irresponsible," or whatever. Although that type of paper is somewhat

difficult to write, even junior high school pupils who have been given sufficient instructions, along with Theophrastus's example, have completed the assignment successfully. Satisfying to both teacher and pupil alike is the fact that while writing those kinds of papers, each pupil is involved in integration of the language arts that is most meaningful to him.

What of the less sophisticated pupil? Fortunately, there is an abundance of post-reading activities that can be used with him, too. Below is an example of haiku written by a rather average third-grade boy as the result of his teacher's showing him the art generally and suggesting that he refer to his tally sheet and the examples noted in his reading to prompt him to write some haiku of his own:

An eight-year old boy
Told Mom a fib to help her
He is now mature

Secondary-school teachers who are familiar with the success of haiku writing in their classrooms can see that with slight alterations, the assignment of a third-grader can be given to college-bound high school seniors. Realizing that such activities are possible, the reader can begin to realize perhaps that individualization in reading does not always have to lead to the isolation of pupils in the reading classroom; even those pupils who vary greatly in talents and capabilities can more

than infrequently work side by side on parallel assignments -- reading assignments and other kinds -- without the work of one person having a demeaning affect on that of another. In fact, teachers trying common-content-based individualized reading will frequently find that pupils who are advanced and those who are not help each other in their work in a way that is not unlike that which is often strived for by those who feel that each person can always profit substantially from his experiences with all others.

An elaborate list of meaningful activities that can stem from common-content-based individualized reading is beyond the scope of this paper, but the list, although finite, seems almost endless. In brief, further activities -- again, to be used with modifications at nearly all levels of instruction -- include creative writing; the composition of expository, narrative, and argumentative works; dramatizations; small group and large group discussions; creative activities of a non-compositional and a non-dramatical nature; critical evaluations; and, generally, a broad range of comprehension activities that employ both encoding and decoding.

Is skill building sacrificed when common-content-based individualization is employed in the reading classroom? If one thinks of "skills" in a most narrow and limited manner, it undoubtedly is, although it is surprising how many of the basic

reading skills can be taught or at least can be very effectively reinforced in the incidental fashions that seem such natural outgrowths of the individualized sessions. When "skills" are thought of more broadly, however, it can be seen that much can be taught, both within the realm of language arts and social skills, by the common-content approach.

As was mentioned near the beginning of this presentation, there appears to be a place in every classroom, at least occasionally for common-content-based individualized reading. No, the technique is not a panacea for the ills related to faulty reading instruction, and it must not be construed that common-content-based individualized reading can ever replace a sound, theoretically based system for teaching either basic or advanced reading skills. The technique does provide for some most important opportunities for children to realize, however, that although all persons are different, any two persons are more similar than they are unlike. Furthermore, the common-content-based plan for individualized reading provides many golden opportunities for the incidental teaching of numerous language arts skills, and, surely, it helps alleviate the problem that stems from that which is lacked most in many reading programs: the lack of time to read.